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“THE GREAT ILLUSION”

BY REAR-ADMIRAL A. T. MAHAN, U.S.N.

IN the early months of the year 1911 appeared a book called *The Great Illusion*,* which attracted at the time much attention and approval which it probably still commands.

I have read the book twice attentively. Owing to the number of topics incidentally discussed, I have found difficulty in realizing to myself the precise thread of the argument. The author, however, in two instances at least, has defined the purpose of the work in words of his own; I say in words of his own, because he has chosen, not unwisely, to preface his conception of “the great illusion,” which he thinks prevails widely, by numerous illustrative quotations from others, whom he constitutes his antagonists in idea. Based upon these citations, he then summarizes (p. 29) the illusion which he detects in them as being

“one of the universally accepted axioms of European politics—namely, that a nation’s financial and industrial stability, its security in commercial activity—in short, its prosperity and well-being—depend upon its being able to defend itself against the aggression of other nations, who will, if they are able, be tempted to commit such aggression because in so doing they will increase *their* power, and consequently *their* prosperity and well-being, at the cost of the weaker and vanquished.”†

Again (p. 336):

“At the root of the whole armament difficulty lies the theory that economic advantage goes with the exercise of military force; in other words, armaments exist as the logical outcome of that illusion with which this book deals.”

I believe that the thesis thus defined is erroneous in at least two particulars. First, as a matter of fact, economic advantage frequently has accompanied the use of military force, and resulted from it. Two conspicuous instances of

* *The Great Illusion*, by Norman Angell. G. P. Putnam’s Sons. 1911.

† Italics here are the author’s, not mine.

this afforded by history are: the supremacy of Great Britain as a financial and industrial community, due mainly to the predominance of her military sea-power during the eighteenth century to the fall of Napoleon in 1815, and the economical development of Germany following upon the war with France in 1870-71. Second, the purpose of armaments in the minds of those maintaining them is not primarily economical advantage, in the sense of depriving a neighboring state of its own, or fear of such consequence to itself through the deliberate aggression of a rival having that particular end in view. The object is the assertion of right in doubtful questions which are continually arising, largely from the progressive exploitation of unutilized regions of the world. In illustration, it is necessary only to cite, as very recent or still pending, the questions of Tripoli, Morocco, and China, with the Open Door. Between the states of European civilization these are not questions of legal right and wrong; because no law exists, no valid title. Titles are being made by international agreements, but the agreements themselves, in the process of development and at the moment of making, are conditioned by force. In connection with these, disputes are continually arising which more than once have led close to war. It is true that, should war come, the scene would be chiefly in Europe, and that provision against financial and economical dangers thence arising is one principal motive to armament; but it is not true that aggression upon the financial and economical system of another state is the motive for armament anywhere.

The particular point of view of the book, which has led both to the selection of the quotations from opponents (pp. 17-28), and also to the definitions of *The Great Illusion*, just cited in the author's words, is further illustrated by two passages. Thus (p. 77): "The real basis of social morality is self-interest": that is, as the proverb more tersely puts it, "Honesty is the best policy."

Again (p. 370):

"Is not the root of the profound distrust of, and hostility to, the peace man, that his plea has been made rather on the basis of altruism than of interest, on morality rather than of policy? The man in the street is firmly convinced that he is being asked to surrender some solid interest in favor of morality—sentiment, as he would call it."

It may be said, then, that the main argument of the book proceeds on the basis that the solid bottom fact in inter-

national relations is regard to material self-interest, and that “ the great illusion ” is that material self-interest can be advanced by the use of force; either by fighting, or by the armaments which, by showing force at hand, prevent fighting yet compass desired ends.

These remarks and quotations can be taken to define the general topic of the book. Before proceeding to discuss it, and to comment upon certain particularities, or details of the argument, it may be best to state at once the very different point of view from which the present writer approaches the matter. I hold that the interest of the nation is indeed the business of the government, but that the danger of war proceeds mainly from the temper of the people, which, when roused, disregards self-interest. In every country the government, in that guardianship of the interests of the state which we call policy, pursues a certain line of conduct. This results in friction with the policy of another country. As discussion proceeds, each government, deeply conscious of the evils of war, endeavors to reach a solution of peace; but to the people the matter gradually assumes the aspect of a right and a wrong, and popular feeling, disregarding of that particular self-interest which peace represents, is wrought up to a pitch of supporting its asserted right by arms. The history of the past summer illustrates these positions. It has been apparent that the governments of France, Germany, and Great Britain have earnestly striven for peace, that their several stands were taken rather on the ground of national right than of immediate economic advantage, and that the moods of the several peoples answered more readily to the feeling of national honor at stake than to any supposed material self-interest.

In short, the inciting causes of war in our day are moral; a statement which includes of course immoral, as both adjectives, though opposite in meaning, as are “ good ” and “ bad,” belong to the same category of motives. The war of the United States against Spain is held by some Americans to have been unjust, and therefore immoral; by others, among whom myself, to have been illustriously moral; but by neither, I apprehend, can it be seriously maintained to have been inspired by self-interest. The American government tried earnestly to avoid it, believed that it could be avoided; deceived therein, I think, by failure to appreciate

Spanish diplomatic methods as illustrated by history. The people forced the issue. In my last article in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*, I have cited *seriatim* the principal wars of the last half-century as proceeding demonstrably from motives essentially moral. Even where self-interest is at the bottom of the trouble, as possibly in the present state of feeling between Germany and Great Britain, it is less the loss endured than the sense of injustice done, or apprehended, that keeps alive the flame.

I believe, therefore, that the fundamental proposition of the book is a mistake. Nations are under no illusion as to the unprofitableness of war in itself; but they recognize that different views of right and wrong in international transactions may provoke collision, against which the only safeguard is armament. Unarmed, or inadequately armed, the nation is exposed to the perils of commercial disintegration and consequent popular suffering, depicted in the quotations from the advocates of armament upon which the author bases his case. No one imagines that fire-insurance and the police are otherwise than unremunerative expenses, unless fire or breaches of the peace occur. The illustrations are time-worn, perhaps a little shop-worn; but they can never be outworn, because the nature of the provision made in police and insurance is exactly that of armament. The new French ministry, just constituted as I write, with the experience of the Morocco controversy fresh in mind, affirms its faith that a strong army and navy are the best guarantee of peace; yet we know that its predecessor labored for peace, and that war was averted by diplomatic action, in which armament assuredly counted. The War of Secession stands as a perpetual beacon against disarmament. Never were two antagonists less armed. A distinct preponderance of armament on one side or the other, or such a common readiness as would have indicated devastating hostilities, might have held the hands of both. Certainly, had the material superiority of the North been organized in armies and navies, there could have been no four years of war.

In this connection it may be interesting to recall the observation of the late Mr. Carl Schurz, that in his wide experience of political speaking he had always found "the people" responsive to moral appeals when plainly set forth; even when the result traversed what appeared to be

their self-interest. Mr. Schurz was a hater of war; but still, as he looked with emotion upon the heaped-up dead at Gettysburg, the War of Secession justified itself to his mind through the moral motive, the extinction of slavery. The two motives, moral and interested, will co-exist; but self-interest, even when recognized, does not possess the impelling power which is supplied by the sympathies, or by the sense of right and wrong. “Thrice is he armed who hath his quarrel *just*.” Self-interest is also less easily perceived by the mass, because its connection with a dispute is often indirect. Bismarck *may* have engineered the wars of his day with a sole view to the material interests of Germany, but the force behind him was the passions and enthusiasm of the people.

The difference between Mr. Angell’s conception and my own of the motives which move nations is illustrated by his comment upon a passage of mine quoted by him:

“That extension of national authority over alien communities which is the dominant note in the world politics of to-day dignifies and enlarges each state, and each citizen that enters its fold. . . . Sentiment, imagination, aspiration, the satisfaction of the rational and moral faculties in some object better than bread alone, all must find part in a worthy motive. *Great and beneficent achievement ministers to worthier contentment than the filling of the pocket.*”

Upon this Mr. Angell’s comment is:

“Have we not come to realize that this is all moonshine, and very mischievous moonshine?”

I regret there is not space to quote in full the remarks which follow (p. 309), for they illustrate how completely the author’s prepossession with material interest, as the great and almost sole cause of national action, dominates even his power to understand another’s words. He likens the idea presented by me to the self-satisfaction of a man elated with his social position and wealth. The words which for present convenience I have italicized show clearly enough a wholly different ideal—that of the use of power for beneficent ends; a moral purpose, certainly. I personally am proud, as an American, of what America has accomplished in the late Spanish possessions and in the Panama Canal Zone; and if I were a Briton, I should feel a like pride in the benefits done to India and to Egypt. I will cite, in support of this simple idea of pride in country, words of the present Mr. Charles Francis Adams, who will not be

suspected of jingoism by any who know either himself or his writings. Speaking of the sanitation triumph at the Isthmus, he says, "Assuredly the world has seen nothing like it before; and, standing face to face with it, is not the American justified in a certain access of race pride?" This I conceive is precisely the gratification indicated in my words criticized by Mr. Angell—national *esprit de corps*, a moral force, the power of which is everywhere recognized.

Argument must proceed necessarily upon the recognition, illustrated by the instances cited, that with nations as with men absolute singleness of motive is rarely found. Mixed motive is the rule, not the exception. Mr. Angell is inclined somewhat to make merry with opponents of his thesis, because at one time they allege self-interest, at another moral motives, as the spring of impulse to war. The inconsistency of this is not in the argument, but in the complex material dealt with—human nature. Bronze is copper and bronze is tin. Nothing is gained, but much is lost, by ignoring duplicity of characteristic.

Nothing too will be gained, only time lost, by disputing the conclusion elaborated at great length by Mr. Angell, that in the close interrelations of modern states injury done to the commercial or financial stability of one reverberates throughout the entire community, returning in due force upon the victor. His theory concerning war, and its incident armament, is founded upon the conception that both are the outcome of supposed material self-interest. Upon this basic assumption he erects the superstructure of argument that, by recognition of the fact that self-interest does not gain by war, but loses, the motive to war and to armaments will be attenuated and ultimately will expire with the illusion which now fosters it. His premise is, I think, his own great illusion. To regard mankind, in individuals or in states, as so dominated by self-interest that the appeal of other motives—ambition, self-respect, resentment of injustice, sympathy with the oppressed, hatred of oppression—is by it overbalanced and inoperative, is not only to misread history but to ignore it. Almost every war of the past half-century contradicts the assertion. Nations will fight for such reasons more readily than for self-interest.

Even on the ground of self-interest only, the argument appears overstrained. That war between two great nations injures both, and that the injury is felt by the whole in-

ternational community, has become a commonplace of modern political thought; testified almost yearly by the anxiety of governments to localize disputes by confining them within a given area. This anxiety is probably the largest constituent factor in the Monroe Doctrine. But when the conclusion is pressed to the point of maintaining that a disproportion between the welfare of two states may not be produced by war, to the permanent advantage of one, so that it may even advance to a position of economic supremacy, the proposition appears contestable. I had occasion several years ago to look somewhat extensively into the economical and financial conditions of Great Britain toward the end of the Napoleonic wars. They were dismal; but it is true none the less that those of the Continent were so much worse that Great Britain owed the long start which she held and kept to this cause largely, of course not solely, for a single reason rarely accounts for all the phenomena of a social order.

Great Britain owed her superiority then to the armed control of the sea, which had sheltered her commercial and industrial fabric from molestation by the enemy; while by the same means she crushed the prosperity of France, disabling her from utilizing her rich resources in the processes of commercial exchange. The latest *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1910) says:

“ The commercial supremacy of England was due to a variety of causes, of which superior intelligence, in the ordinary business sense, was not the most important. Her insular position, continuity of political development, and freedom from domestic broils played an important part in bringing about a steady and continuous growth of industry and manufactures for several generations before the modern era. The great wars of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century gave England the control of the markets of the world. When peace was restored, England had something in the nature of a monopoly.”

Progress of this kind, which may not reach supremacy but simply modify the relative conditions of the states concerned, may be brought about either directly or indirectly. As the result of the war between France and Germany in 1870, Germany acquired territory and a huge indemnity. These were direct results. She received also the final impulse to national unity, consummated in the formal institution of the German Empire. *The Great Illusion* considers the territory and the indemnity to have been necessarily

of doubtful benefit, but the argument is not convincing. The statement (p. 94) that prices go up as money becomes abundant is obvious, but it is difficult to understand why loans bearing interest may by good administration produce advantage to a nation—or a firm—whereas a sum bearing no interest must be a detriment. As a matter of fact, Germany was handicapped by lack of capital, due to her late entry into the industrial race and to the severe competition of neighboring rivals of longer industrial antecedents and consequent larger accumulations—of France, Great Britain, Holland, Belgium. A close and extensive student of German conditions writes of 1871, “Material enterprise of every kind was fertilized by the capital which now became loosened, and sought new and larger channels of employment.”* The capital drawn from France could scarcely have come amiss to such conditions, though it is certain that sudden easy money caused wild speculation, with attendant disasters, as it always does.

On the other hand German national unity has assured, throughout the countries thus confederated into one empire, the development of an economical and industrial system which, among other effects, has resulted in reducing emigration from some 200,000, in 1879, to 25,000 yearly now; although, coincident with this diminution, the population is increasing by 800,000 annually. This is indirect result. Moreover, that 25,000 outgo does not denote a surplus of unemployed, as former conditions did. On the contrary, Germany receives at certain seasons of the year a large influx of labor from surrounding districts; so that the claim has been advanced that she is now an immigrant country, notwithstanding the annual natural increase of nearly a million—totaling fifty per cent. since 1870.

In connection with this result, from the political union of several communities previously separated, may be noted the confident assertion of *The Great Illusion* (p. 45) that enlargement of territory does not connote increase of financial prosperity. It is said, let Germany annex Holland, and not an individual German or Dutchman will be a penny the richer. There appears here the fallacy that the administration of a large capital cannot be made more productive proportionally than that of a smaller. Granting equal efficiency of administration, the proposition seems to contravene experi-

* W. H. Dawson. *The Evolution of Modern Germany*, p. 38.

ence. When the scale of increase is as small as in this instance, the population of the Netherlands being less than one-tenth that of Germany, effect, even ultimate effect, may possibly be slight. Nevertheless it would be there; while in the consolidation of the German states into the German Empire, or of the thirteen American States into the American Union, with its subsequent expansions, the consequences have been notorious. Both these political measures conduced to great economic advantage, and both were enlargements of territory. The same is true of the unification of Italy; a first period of great distress followed by sustained progress.

The degree to which such consolidations are beneficial depends upon whether they are natural—correspond to fundamental facts—or artificial. In the one case a nation is formed, in the other merely a political entity—like Turkey—not homogeneous. The effect, when real, is to extend the area of assured peace for the communities concerned, and also to strengthen them as competitors in the markets of the world. Concerning Alsace-Lorraine, a much smaller area than Holland, it has been noted that not only did the annexation add to the industrial power of the Empire by the manufacturing establishments there existing, but also that these, being brought within the industrial system of Germany, competing on equal terms, forced a higher standard upon German manufacturers as the only way to meet these new and better-equipped rivals in the home market.*

But it may be urged that these instances, England after the Napoleonic wars and Germany after and since the war with France, if conceded applicable at all, relate to conditions which have now passed away to return no more. Much of the argument of *The Great Illusion* turns upon the allegation that the past is in many respects so wholly past that arguments based upon its experiences are no longer valid. It happens, however, that we are now in the midst—perhaps, indeed, no further than at the entrance—of an era wherein is foreshadowed clearly a future class of great issues, which in some instances have already taken concrete form. Upon these I have touched frequently in previous articles of this series. In restating the facts, I am glad to avail myself of certain phrases and expressions used in a late number of

* Howard. *Recent Industrial Progress in Germany*, p. 29. Houghton, Mifflin & Co. 1907.

The Spectator (December 30, 1911) by a correspondent of the paper and criticized in the editorial columns: "The instability of the present mapping-out of the earth's surface"; "the resettlement to be accomplished"; "the capacity to govern well native populations," in whose hands vast territories now lie useless; "the capacity to bring into use material resources which lie undeveloped." "Are the British four and a half millions which alone now occupy Australia in effective occupation" of the vast continent? "Can we wonder if Germans ask themselves whether there would be fundamental iniquity if they took in hand the development of the Amazon Valley?"

The recent Morocco question was only a particular instance of this class of disputes. It must be remembered that it was not merely between France and Germany; that among its antecedents had been arrangements between France and Great Britain, and France and Spain. The process of readjustments is going on before our eyes with the rapidity of a kaleidoscope; Morocco, Tripoli, Bosnia, Albania, and Macedonia, with Turkey in general—where the recent attempt at better government appears to have broken down—Persia, China, the Open Door. Our Monroe Doctrine stands, succinctly, for our intention that the like readjustments shall not take place at the expense of America; and this position may possibly be resented as a contravention of international common law. Amid all this Germany stands observant and equipped, with administrative and industrial efficiency fully demonstrated, convinced that she has not yet received her fair share of the world's activities, yet unable to find a suitable entrance to play the part to which she is equal and, knowing herself to be, is determined to have. We know that this sentiment is prevalent. The Chancellor of the Empire very recently said:

"For months past we have been living, and we are living now, in an atmosphere of passion such as we perhaps have never before experienced in Germany. At the root of this feeling is the determination of Germany to make its strength and capability prevail in the world." (*Fortnightly Review*, January, 1912, p. 147.)

In pursuit of the thesis that self-interest is the fundamental factor in international relations, and that no advantage to self-interest is obtainable by military force; or, as it is put, that "armaments exist [only] as the logical outcome of the illusion with which this book deals," *The*

Great Illusion is led to disparage size, military power, and the sentiment of nationality as elements of national well-being. Here, in passing, comment is necessary upon the remark that small, undefended states, such as Belgium and Switzerland, are equally prosperous, or more prosperous, than certain large ones. These states are not wholly undefended in themselves; but their security depends upon the maintenance of the Balance of Power, which the great armed states conceive essential to their own well-being. Under the ægis of this mutual jealousy, reinforced by a moral indisposition to conscious wrong-doing, such as the wanton annexation of a weak neighbor would be, the smaller states prosper in peace, and are spared the expense of armament in great part. Their fire insurance, or war risk, is paid by other states. *The Great Illusion's* explanation (p. 44) is quite otherwise. “On what does the evident security of the small state rest? On the simple fact that its conquest would assure to the conqueror *no profit*.”

The German Empire is the most conspicuous instance of the recent constitution of a great nation, territorially extensive, equipped with great military force. It is also seemingly the most aggressive of the large European states; because, being narrowly circumscribed by land and by sea, owing to its geographical position and past history, it has the poorest present opportunity for expansion. From its military characteristics it is chosen for frequent animadversion, being cited as an instance of non-achievement of national ends as compared with smaller communities. Thus it is stated (p. 38) that Norwegian three and a half per cents. stand at 102, the German three per cents. at 82; but as regards national well-being as an object of government, it is not mentioned that of the Norwegian two and a half million souls 20,000 emigrate annually, of Germany's sixty-five million only 25,000, though the population increases by 800,000 annually. Comparison is instituted also between the funds of “powerless” Belgium and “powerful” Germany, 96 to 82; but the modern prosperity of Belgium antedates by nearly two generations (1815-1870) the constitution of the German Empire, with which began the great industrial advance of Germany.

Again, it is urged (p. 100) that the standard of comfort among French people is higher than among Germans, despite the industrial and commercial development of the lat-

ter, which is styled a "sensational splash." To which nation, however, shall be attributed the greater virility—to the one which, far overweighted, has done so much in a generation and at the same time increased its numbers fifty per cent., or to the one which, repressing natural growth, has thereby augmented mere material well-being? Unless a corresponding physical degeneration can be shown among Germans, there can be but one reply.

The period of distress in Germany following 1871 is attributed (pp. 95-100) freely to the indemnity of a thousand million dollars taken from France, showing, as it is claimed, the unprofitableness of indemnities; but it is not mentioned that, apart from the period of speculation unhappily excited, Germany then was passing through the transition period from an agricultural and handicraft system to the modern industrial, the same process which had been attended in other countries—notably Great Britain—with equal if not greater agitation and suffering. It is said (p. 38, note) that in the small country Holland the wealth of the individual Dutchman averages sixteen thousand francs, while the German averages but nine thousand; but it is neglected to observe that Germany up to the middle of the last century has been an agricultural country—in 1871 three-fourths of the population was rural—capital scarce; whereas Holland, favorably situated for commerce and driven upon the outside world for employment, had long been a capitalistic country with big accumulations. A hundred years ago the Dutch did a large banking business, while the inland rural military monarchies depended upon British subsidies. It was the divisions of Germany which principally prevented her economic progress; state working against state. Consolidation into a great community gave internal peace and industrial development; but for the accumulations which constitute capital time is needed for nations as well as for an individual.

To evidence the prosperity of small countries, Norway's merchant shipping is cited as thrice that of Great Britain in proportion to population; but it is not noted that, in the same proportion, the total tonnage entered and cleared *with cargoes* in the United Kingdom is double that of Norway. That is, in proportion to population, there is double the commercial movement. So also Spain's management of the war of 1898 is compared (p. 222) with that of the

United States, in order to show the superiority, even in military management, of a commercial country over one essentially military. This is, perhaps, the most extreme disregard of notorious conditions. The inefficiency of Spain is notorious in civil as well as military matters. Does any one suppose that the United States would have had a like walk-over if opposed to the military state of Germany? The trouble with Spain was not that she was military, but that she as a nation was incapable and had been for over two hundred years.

Amid many suggestive remarks, Mr. Angell's treatment appears vitiated by failure to appreciate these and other qualifications which make against his thesis. Insistence upon details, however, rather obscures than elucidates, and the author's presentation of his case suffers from this, as also, especially in the latter part of the book, from unbecoming superciliousness of tone. The fundamental error, however, is the conception that nations maintain armaments with a view to aggression in behalf of self-interest, measured in speedy returns of dollars and cents; a view which dominates the entire book, despite a timely caution conveyed by a prominent international banker (p. 135, note):

“ Though the economics of your book are unchallengeable, it is futile, for the simple reason that it deals with material interests, and people to-day do not go to war about business or material interests. I do not know what they go to war about, but I am quite sure it is not about business.”

In the past, when governments were little responsible to the people, wars were made irrespective of popular feeling from motives of advantage purely. To-day all recent history shows that governments are reluctant to go to war; but they recognize, and the people sustain them, that war may come, and that if it does it will expose the nation to vital injury to its “ financial and industrial stability.” This is quite different from the apprehension that the reason of an enemy for declaring war is to inflict such injury.

The causes of quarrel now are quite otherwise than the barefaced robbery which marked the career of absolute monarchs like Louis XIV., Frederick the Great, and Napoleon. The motives now are rarely simple, usually complex; but historically they have not been “ to increase power and prosperity at the cost of the vanquished.” Those who remember the War of Secession know how powerfully the

sentiments phrased by the words, "The Union" on one side, and "Independence" or "State Rights" on the other, outweighed any thought of interest. The German people rose as one man to support Bismarck, because the quarrel appealed mightily to the nascent sentiment of racial unity. Russia attacked Turkey in 1877 because of the wave of intense popular sympathy with peoples undergoing cruel oppression; a sympathy widely felt elsewhere, but in Russia only transmuted into act. The South African war illustrated what the author of *The Great Illusion* (*Spectator*, January 6) thinks impracticable for the most part; namely, the protection by force of the citizens of one state in the territory of another. The British Government scarcely expected to increase its prosperity or financial stability by aggression upon the Transvaal Republic. It stood to lose money, not to gain. The whole question turned upon the treatment of British subjects during the interval between immigration and naturalization; and the motive drew in not the British Islands only, but the English race in Canada and Australasia as well.

A mature consideration of the wars of the past sixty years, and of the occasions also in which war has seemed imminent but has been averted, will show that the motives to war have not often been "aggression for the sake of increasing power, and consequently prosperity and financial well-being." The impulses, however mistaken they are thought by some, or actually may have been, have risen above mere self-interest to feelings and convictions which the argument of *The Great Illusion* does not so much as touch. The entire conception of the work is itself an illusion based upon a profound misreading of human action. To regard the world as governed by self-interest only is to live in a non-existent world, an ideal world, a world possessed by an idea much less worthy than those which mankind, to do it bare justice, persistently entertains. Yet this is the aspect under which *The Great Illusion* avowedly regards the world that now is. It matters little what the arguments are by which such a theory is advocated, when the concrete facts of history are against it.

A. T. MAHAN.